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ABSTRACT

Communication policy research has been defined as a response to the policy maker's increasing need for factual information in an environment of accelerating technological change. This definition presumed that the social researcher provided the policy maker with such information. Enough examples of contradition between research findings and policy statements exist to suggest that this definition is a somewhat idealized conception. While a direct linkage between policy research and policy making has been often obscured, it was projected that an indirect linkage will begin to emerge in the future, especially for research focusing on new technology. Since the design of communication systems utilizing new technology has become an integral part of the research, the social researcher has become involved not only in studying communication behavior, but also in the design of communication systems. (HAB)

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An Emerging Role of Social Research in the Communication Policy Making Process

by

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Analyzing the process of knowledge transfer from communication researchers to policymakers is at best a difficult assignment. To begin with, the process itself has not been the subject of systematic study, so it has an air of ambiguity and mystery. The process involves extremely complex issues which are presumably borrowing from an equally complex body of knowledge making it difficult to point directly to any correspondence between the two. Consequently, there is tremendous diversity of opinion regarding how well, if at all, the transfer takes place. If there is any agreement at all, it is that policymakers need more information on which to base their decisions and that the transfer should take place. What follows are some suggestions as to how this transfer may take place from the point of view of a social researcher involved in the impact of telecommunications technology research, in particular the National Science Foundation funded two-way cable television experiment being conducted in Rockford, Illinois. A good place to begin is with a definition of terms and key issues.

Pool (1974) defines the emerging field of communications policy research as "normative research about alternative ways of organizing and structuring society's communication system."[1] Such research has gained popularity because of the need of the policymaker to have more hard facts on which to base policy decisions in an environment of accelerating technological change. The rise of communications policy research is directly related to technological developments in communication, such as the two-way capability of cable television, that contribute to an experience gap for the policymaker, creating the need for the communications policy research. Because of this critical link to technology, communications policy research almost always contains some major technological component.

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While technology is an important part of communications policy research, it is by no means the only part. Because of the complexity of considering developing policy for an entire communications system, a multidisciplinary approach is mandatory. Engineers, for example, are able to handle the technical aspects of the communication hardware, but they are not able to develop the appropriate regulatory models or assess the impact on human behavior. Accordingly, communications policy research requires engineers, legal scholars, and behavioral scientists all working together. In order to do this, each discipline must become familiar with the others. This requires the engineer, for example, to become familiar with the legal considerations and behavioral science implications involved in communication technology. The behavioral scientist, in similar fashion, must become conversant with the engineering terminology surrounding communication technology as well as the legal and regulatory implications. Perhaps the ideal communication policy researcher would have an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering, a law degree, and a doctoral degree in behavioral science mass communications.

Presumably then, the behavioral scientist with the engineering and legal background is ready to go to work to provide policymakers with the hard facts they need to cope with developing communication technology. There are, however, enough examples of contradiction between such research findings and subsequent policy statements to suggest that this is a somewhat idealized conception. According to Owen (1975) the "difficulty of interdisciplinary communication is a small thing compared to the difficulty of communication between the research community and policymakers."[2] An often cited example of this is the apparent lack of application of the Report to the Surgeon General, "Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence," to policy decisionmaking. The Chairman of the FCC,

Richard Wiley (1975) describes the problem often found in government research as "studies which gather dust rather than agency readership, and which bring scholarly credit to their authors but little or no benefit to agency decision-makers."[3]

An important reason for this is the natural gap that exists between the academically-oriented social researcher and the practically-oriented policymaker. The social researcher and policymaker have quite different career reward systems. The social researcher lives in a world requiring a Ph.D. to enter. The measure of career performance for the social researcher is largely in the quantity and quality of academic publications. The policymaker, on the other hand, has as the measure of career performance the ability to solve problems in a complex organizational structure. The social researcher has as a main objective the advancement of knowledge, whereas the policymaker's main objective is to solve practical operational problems.

The social researcher and policymaker, consequently, have very different time orientations. The social researcher is willing to devote an entire career to the studying of a single problem, whereas the policymaker must respond to a problem in a much more constrained time horizon. The social researcher is content to measure time in years, whereas the policymaker may be stretching to measure time in weeks or months. The social researcher simply does not have to work under the same time pressure as does the policymaker. This of course contributes to the gap that exists between the two. Policymakers chide social researchers for not being practical because they want to study the problem beyond the demands of the current circumstance; and researchers chide policymakers for lacking sufficient discipline in their decision-making to accomodate properly done research findings.

Suggestions for bridging this policymaker social researcher gap usually involve a call for more communication between the two groups. Often involved is a suggestion that the social researcher attempt to make his research more relevant to the policymaker. As Chairman Wiley (1975) lists the broad criteria for the evaluation of research proposals by the FCC:

1. Is the proposal appropriate for research?
2. Does it deal with matters of substantial and timely importance to agency policy-making?
3. Are the anticipated results likely to assist the Commission in decision-making?

While these criteria certainly focus any policy research funded by the FCC to the needs of the agency, they imply policymaker control of the research agenda.

Social research controlled by the particular funding agency would naturally tend to serve that agency. Given federal bureaucracies with an interest in developing public policy, it would follow that such research would tend to promote continued public policy development, whether the policy is responding to identified societal needs or not. Turning over control of the research agenda to the policymaker would reduce the role of social research in the public policy decision process to that of a management tool in much the same way as marketing research has become a tool in the corporate decision process. Those social researchers committed to the values of academe would find such practical research less than satisfying despite the lure of generous government funding.

If the social researcher could set the research agenda the focus would probably not be on particular public policy issues, but rather on basic research to better understand the relevant social communication processes. Communication policy issues would be considered only as they relate to the understanding of the basic communication process, and would allow for the conclusion that no policy

development is necessary. This of course regenerates the policymakers charge of impracticality on the part of the social researcher. Perhaps a compromise is possible, but the gap still exists making a direct transfer of knowledge claimed by the social researcher to the policy making process at best obscure.

This does not mean that the transfer of knowledge to the policy making process will always be so. If basic research in such areas as the impact of telecommunications technology is supported at a level to allow for actual field experimentation, then an indirect transfer of communications research knowledge to the policy making process will begin to emerge. An excellent example of the kind of research support required is the two-way cable television experiments funded by the National Science Foundation. Given the initial charge to design experiments demonstrating the utility of two-way cable television technology in social service delivery and urban administration applications, research teams such as the one assembled at Michigan State University began work designing potential future communication systems. After spending many months on-site studying the relevant communication processes in the Rockford community, and considering the potential of the available interactive cable technology, several applications were designed from the unique perspective of the social researcher. The proposed applications as reported by the Project Manager Thomas Baldwin (1975) included in-service firefighter training designed to reduce the life hazard and property damage, a cable information and referral service to provide much needed access to social service information, diagnosis of developmental delays in children at a younger age increasing the chance for successful remediation, several legal communication applications designed to promote court efficiency and reduce backlogs, and science education teleconferencing designed to promote more efficient use of existing educational facilities.[5] The interesting characteristic of this research is that

the design of the communications system is an integral part of the research, that the social researcher becomes not only involved in studying communication behavior, but also is able to apply the results of the study in the design of the communications system.

This type of research is unmistakably teleological, that is the social researcher is in effect designing the shape of the future. The social researcher is not only studying communication behavior, but also has the opportunity to apply his understanding of the underlying communication processes to actually design a communication system. It is this opportunity to design the communication system that provides the social researcher the opportunity to indirectly transfer social research knowledge to the policy making process.

Merely designing and implementing a new communication system is not enough to affect the policymaker. The resulting research report, no matter how well written, is still subject to the problem common to most communications policy research reports, that is gathering dust rather than readership. The real purpose of the comprehensive reports is to satisfy the academic community and can not be expected to gain significant readership among the policymakers. The ultimate test is community acceptance of the communication system. If after the completion of the design and experimental phases of the research project, the communication system is continued in use by members of the community for which the system was designed, then even in the most practical terms the research would be judged as a success. If that community demands continued use of the system, then their advocacy would certainly facilitate policymaker consideration of research findings beyond the dusty confines of the research report. If on the other hand, the communication system is unable to generate community support at the end of the experimental period, then the research along with any related policy implications would have to be considered as unsuccessful.

To realize this kind of indirect transfer of knowledge from the social researcher to the policymaker it is necessary for the social researcher to design systems that are economically viable in the eyes of the particular community. This places considerable responsibility with the social researcher. In addition to demonstrating the utility of communications technology in a particular application, it is necessary to demonstrate the overall potential for economic support of the additional technology. This is especially difficult when the initial demonstration applications are in the realm of public service which imply public funding that may or may not be forthcoming. Also, if the technology can support additional applications, then the total cost of the system can be shared, thereby reducing the cost for any single application. It is in recognition of this responsibility that the MSU research team has actively sought to develop additional applications for the interactive cable technology in the Rockford community, including applications which have the potential for commercial support. Among commercial applications include the obvious pay-television marketing and advertising research applications, and in-home shopping and banking applications. In addition to working with members of the social service and government establishment in the Rockford community to develop applications under NSF auspices, the research team is considering applications in the commercial area as well. The research team has contacted commercial research agencies, manufacturers, financial institutions and various marketing organizations in order to develop commercial applications to demonstrate the ultimate economic support of the communications system.

This potential for an indirect transfer of knowledge between the social researcher and policymaker suggests a new role for social research other than merely churning out research reports that consider various policy issues at the request of the policymakers themselves. This emerging role is the creative potential of the social researcher to apply the knowledge directly in designing and demonstrating the utility of new technology communication systems. This kind of communication

research effort requires considerable confidence on the part of the policymaker in the social researcher. It requires that the research agenda remain in the hands of the social researcher so that basic research is the priority, and that funding levels are at a sufficiently high level to allow for the necessary field experimentation.

NOTES

[1]Ithiel de Sola Pool, "The Rise of Communications Policy Research" Journal of Communications 24 (Spring 1974):31.

[2]Bruce M. Owen, "Policy Research and Its Discontents" in Telecommunications Policy Research ed. Bruce M. Owen (Palo Alto: Aspen Institute, 1975), p.5.

[3]Richard E. Wiley, "Making Policy Research Relevant to Regulatory Decision-Making," in Telecommunications Policy Research ed. Bruce M. Owen (Palo Alto: Aspen Institute, 1975), p. 155.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Thomas F. Baldwin, Bradley S. Greenberg and Thomas A. Muth Experimental Applications of Two-Way Cable Communications in Urban Administration and Social Service Delivery, Department of Telecommunication, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1975.